

VZCZCXRO1389
PP RUEHPA
DE RUEHUJA #0681/01 1011148
ZNY CCCCC ZZH

P 111148Z APR 07 ZDK
FM AMEMBASSY ABUJA

TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC PRIORITY 9140
INFO RUEHZK/ECOWAS COLLECTIVE PRIORITY
RUEHWR/AMEMBASSY WARSAW PRIORITY 0226
RUEHOS/AMCONSUL LAGOS PRIORITY 6557
RUEAIIA/CIA WASHINGTON DC PRIORITY
RUEKJCS/DIA WASHINGTON DC PRIORITY
RHMFIS/HQ USEUCOM VAIHINGEN GE PRIORITY
RHCKJAC/JAC MOLESWORTH JCDX RAF MOLESWORTH UK PRIORITY
RUFOADA/JAC MOLESWORTH RAF MOLESWORTH UK PRIORITY
RHEHNSC/NSC WASHINGTON DC PRIORITY

C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 ABUJA 000681

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E.O. 12958: DECL: 04/10/2017

TAGS: PGOV KDEM PHUM NI

SUBJECT: BUGAJE: WE WALKED INTO A TRAP

REF: ABUJA 460

Classified By: Ambassador John Campbell for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

¶1. (C) SUMMARY: Six weeks after arguing that a flawed election is better than a postponed election, Usman Bugaje, a key advisor to Vice President Atiku Abubakar, now says that the country's political opposition has walked into a trap by believing that it could out maneuver the ruling party on polling day. Bugaje now believes that the upcoming elections will not offer the opposition the possibility of competitive rigging, and that actual elections may not happen at all in as many as 20 states. Bugaje, also a gubernatorial aspirant in Katsina state, said he believes that INEC will, nonetheless, announce results for the entire nation. As a result, the only way to have a credible poll, Bugaje argues, is to postpone the election, install a new INEC chairman, and set up an interim government headed by the Chief Justice of the Supreme Court. End summary.

BAD ELECTIONS ARE A COMING AND ATIKU'S OUT OF TIME

¶2. (C) In a hour-long discussion with Poloff after returning from a conference on Nigeria in Washington, Bugaje admitted that his previous assumptions three weeks ago had been wishful thinking (reftel). His current assessment on elections has implications, he intimated, for his gubernatorial run in Katsina State and for the Vice-President who is facing longer odds at getting his name on the ballots. With little more than days before the election Bugaje believes that "we fell into a trap," and that nothing short of a postponed election can lead to a credible outcome. At the Nigerian National Assembly, where Bugaje is Chairman of the House Foreign Relations Committee, a small group of members is working quietly on draft legislation for an interim government.

¶3. (C) The draft legislation would create an interim government headed by the Chief Justice and would guide the country to free and fair elections. With elections planned for the weekend, Bugaje suggested that the plans are a long-shot, but could loom large if the first round of elections are a total bust. Although he did not disclose the specific wording of the legislation, he did suggest that the aim was to provide an environment for credible elections. It would involve replacing the President and Vice-President on May 29 with the Chief Justice, who would guide the country to fair elections. The Chairman of INEC and a number of the commissioners would be replaced as a precursor to renewed efforts to organize elections.

¶4. (C) As it stands now, Bugaje said, INEC is set to conduct an election-like event which might or might not include voting in much of the country. Because of the poor logistical planning, Bugaje asserted no real election would happen, but INEC would, nonetheless, declare a resounding victory for PDP in both rounds of the elections. With a disorganized opposition and no apparent plan to follow the process of tabulation, it would be hard to prevent massive fraud, he said. The only possibility, Bugaje said, was for observation groups to document the places where elections did not happen, but results were declared. He predicted this might be the case in a majority of polling places in up to as many as 20 states.

¶5. (C) Postponing elections was a sensible alternative, he said, but he was not actively working towards that end. He suggested this might be a more attractive alternative for the Vice-President. He confirmed that some members of the National Assembly were preparing draft legislation, including an interim government bill which could be presented if elections failed or were delayed. Under that legislation, the Chief Justice of the Nigerian Supreme Court would temporarily lead the nation and organize fresh elections.

¶6. (C) In his role as advisor to a candidate, Bugaje said that the Vice-President has run out of time to get his name on the ballot. The time-consuming legal cases have robbed the campaign of political momentum. More importantly, he said, the Vice-President's strongest case, challenging the legality of the Administrative Panel's indictment, has been, for political reasons, sitting dormant in an Abuja High court since September 2006. The outcome of the other cases, all at

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various stages of appeal, were less certain, he said. As a result, he suggested the Vice President might turn to the contingency plan of supporting Buhari.

CAMPBELL